Introduction

“Keep to the rhythm and you’ll keep to life.”

– Reverend Alonzo Hickman

During the course of his career, Ralph Ellison published one masterpiece of fiction, *Invisible Man* (1952), for which he won the National Book Award. He spent the last forty years of his life working on a novel that remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1994. Even though Ellison viewed himself first and foremost as a writer of fiction, there has been less attention paid to his unfinished novel than to his acclaimed *Invisible Man*, or, for that matter, even to his classic essay collections, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), besides speculation as to the reasons why Ellison failed to complete the work. In 2010, John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley broke this trend when they came together to publish Ellison’s complete work on his second novel into one compilation of epic proportions entitled *Three Days Before the Shooting*…. This collection represents the life’s work of one of the most cherished American minds of the 20th century and deserves attention and wide readership. The novel can be hard to tackle due to its unfinished status and length of over 1,000 pages, but when one approaches the work with an open mind, it proves to contain some of Ellison’s finest prose and most poignant truths.

During the time that he worked on *Three Days Before the Shooting*…, Adam Bradley also wrote a critical piece entitled *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, which examines the writing process by which Ellison produced both the second novel and *Invisible Man*. In this text, Bradley calls for a reconsideration of Ralph Ellison’s career and claims that “[t]he publication of *Three Days Before the Shooting*… demands that we adjust the center of gravity of Ellison’s literary legacy, shifting a greater share of the balance toward the final forty years of his life” (Bradley, 10). Through his close
examination of the time that Ellison spent writing *Three Days Before the Shooting*..., Bradley takes many positive steps towards altering the discussion of Ellison’s career. However, his focus on Ellison’s compositional process leads to an emphasis on biographical facts that help to explain the reason that the novel was never published. And while this approach to *Three Days Before the Shooting*... is helpful in many ways, it fails to grasp the full complexity of the text. In order to fully appreciate the novel that Ellison spent the majority of his literary career working on, I seek to present here a framework that offers close analyses of specific passages within the work.

Before Ellison conceived of himself as a novelist, he was a trumpet player and an aspiring composer. Even after he discovered the great literary works that would push him towards becoming a writer, music continued to inspire Ellison as is evident in his respected career as a jazz critic. Ellison’s work represents the coming together of two distinct art forms, reflecting his identity as both writer and musician.

In the “Introduction” to *Invisible Man*, which Ellison wrote over thirty years after the novel’s completion, he says of his writing process: “I would have to improvise upon my materials in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst metamorphosis.”

This vision of Ellison as a dynamic artist who improvises on the page reveals him as a jazz musician whose instrument of choice is written prose. As such, *Three Days Before the Shooting*... emerges as a vital component in Ellison’s discography, which he recorded over a forty-year period during his literary career. Like most discographies, this body of work contains less refined, unedited cuts, as well as tunes that were constantly reworked and

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1 Ellison: *Invisible Man* [IM], xxiii
reinvented throughout Ellison’s career of improvisation. Through a jazz-inspired reading, *Three Days Before the Shooting*… comes together as a coherent work of art connected through Ellison’s riffs, tunes, and timbres that are as distinct and recognizable to the savvy “listener” as those played by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, or Miles Davis.

*Three Days Before the Shooting*… is presented as a jazz-text from the very first paragraph when the central protagonist, Reverend Alonzo Hickman, is described as “God’s trombone.” Hickman is an aging African American preacher and former jazz trombonist on whose sensibility Ellison often relies to get his points across. The majority of the novel follows Hickman as he wanders around the United States—from Georgia to Oklahoma to Washington D.C.—in search of a racist, and presumably “white” senator named Adam Sunraider. As an infant, Sunraider was left in Hickman’s care, but he eventually ran away from Hickman as a teenager. During Hickman’s travels, he encounters many memorable characters with whom he has long, meaningful dialogues. In the majority of these passages, Ellison stresses Hickman’s unique view of the world as a jazz-preacher by including musical techniques in Hickman’s oratorical style such as call and response, rhythmic language, and “riffing,” a technique that will be discussed later. Ellison contrasts Hickman with characters that make use of rhetorical techniques that are similar to Hickman’s in their musicality, yet in many ways are distinctly different. Through their musical language, Ellison’s characters are presented as jazz instrumentalists who each use their own instruments and play in their own unique style. The lengthy passages in which Ellison allows these characters to have their voices heard can be

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2 Ellison: *Three Days Before the Shooting*…[TBS], 5
understood as jazz “solos” that are brought together to make up Ellison’s discography.

A jazz reading of the second novel provides a way in which to closely analyze passages as solos in an attempt more fully to grasp the complexity of *Three Days Before the Shooting*.... Through conceiving of the novel as part of a jazz discography, the reader can concentrate less on the unfinished nature of the novel and instead appreciate the work as a collection of virtuosic solos of the written word, which are played through different characters that represent Ellison’s instruments of expression.
Can You Dig?

The first section of *Three Days Before the Shooting*…, labeled Part 1: Book 1, is distinctly different in style from the rest of the prose that follows it. To start, the section is told in the first person from the point of view of a white journalist named Welborn McIntyre. The rest of the novel is told in the third person and for the most part follows the wanderings of Reverend Hickman. In Part 1: Book 1, McIntyre investigates the attempted assassination of Senator Sunraider; a fact which connects his story to the rest of the novel. McIntyre’s search for answers leads him to the hospital where Senator Sunraider is being treated. Outside of the senator’s hospital room, McIntyre meets Reverend Hickman but is unaware of the reverend’s connection to Sunraider as the man who raised him. Because of this lack of knowledge, McIntyre is forced to grapple with the mystery of why a black preacher would be at the bedside of a white, notoriously racist senator.

McIntyre’s ignorance of the relationship between Hickman and Sunraider sets up the common theme in Part 1: Book 1 in which McIntyre is constantly identified as an outsider. McIntyre is unable to break out of this this position because he brings a close-minded approach to situations that require deep thought and contemplation. Through his placement of McIntyre in the first section of the novel, Ellison uses McIntyre as a metaphor that represents the way in which *Three Days Before the Shooting*… can be grossly misinterpreted if one does not approach the work with an open mind. Throughout the first section, McIntyre is continuously blinded by his preconceptions of people’s identities and his ultra-rationalistic approach toward complex issues. At the end of Book 1: Part 1, McIntyre’s faults come to a culmination when he interviews a black jazzman, LeeWillie Minifees. McIntyre is stubborn in his
belief that Minifees is connected to the assassination of Senator Sunraider even though he has no hard evidence. This belief comes from the fact that several days before Senator Sunraider was shot, McIntyre happened upon a scene where Minifees ceremoniously burned his Cadillac on the senator's lawn in reaction against a racist comment that the senator made when he called Cadillacs "coon cages." Minifees was then presumed to be mentally unstable and conveniently charged to the same hospital as the senator.

In seeking out an interview with Minifees, McIntyre approaches Charleston, a black hospital assistant and friend of Minifees. During McIntyre and Charleston’s encounter, the latter assumes that McIntyre is a fan of Minifees’s music, but has reservations about McIntyre’s intentions:

He [Charleston] frowned. “But didn’t you say you were here on account of Sunraider?”
“Yes, I did. But that’s an official assignment: I’m interested in Minifees on my own.”
“You mean you dig LeeWillie?”
“Dig?”
“I mean do you understand him, like his music?”
“Oh, sure, I admire him very much. Do you know him?”
“Hell, yes I know him. But I said do you really dig him?”
“Well, I think I do. Shouldn’t I?”
He gave a slight smile. “Well, man, to tell the truth, just by looking at you, I wouldn’t have believed that you ever even heard about LeeWillie—at least until he burned his rubber…”

In the above conversation, McIntyre covers up the real reason for his interest in Minifees in order to score an interview with him. In an attempt to reveal McIntyre’s true intentions, Charleston asks if McIntyre “digs” Minifees and in doing so tests McIntyre’s understanding of Minifees’ world. Charleston makes an important distinction about the underlying meaning of what it is to “dig” when he asks McIntyre: “I mean do you really understand him.” According to Charleston, to “dig” an artist like
Minifees goes beyond just listening to his music and requires an understanding of the artist as an individual and his position in the larger community in which the artist is involved.

McIntyre successfully attains an interview with Minifees, which begins when Minifees mocks previous interviews that he has had with “doctors” who are presumably sociologists and psychologists. In his fake interview with Minifees, McIntyre asks loaded questions such as: “‘Mister Minifees, was your father often absent from home.’... ‘And did he abandon your mother.’... ‘Were you ever a member of a subversive group?’” (TBS, 217-218). Minifees’s mocking should immediately reveal to McIntyre the ridiculousness of his subject’s situation in being imprisoned and made a sociological test case. However, McIntyre remains blind to Minifees’ true identity and even contributes to the stereotypes of him when he persists in asking questions that attempt to reveal Minifees’ connection to the assassination of the senator.

After McIntyre tells Minifees about the shooting, he is adamant in knowing the race of the shooter. McIntyre asks Minifees, “does the gunman’s color make such a difference to you?” and Minifees responds by saying, “You’re damn right it does!” (TBS, 222). Minifees then uses the shooting of the Senator as a metaphor for the predicament of black musicians who create ideas or “riffs” that white musicians appropriate and consequently make large profits off of. Minifees felt that in burning his Cadillac he had successfully undermined the Senator, but it was important that the Senator be forced to live with his rebellion. Minifees claims that the white man who shot Sunraider stole his “riff” of undermining the Senator and successfully received all of the attention that he deserved. McIntyre continues to be unsympathetic towards Minifees’ predicament when he comments on the story:
“Listening to his voice fade in the dark, I didn’t know whether to laugh or to throw up my hands at the incongruity between his act and his intention” (TBS, 227).

McIntyre is unable to understand why Minifees would burn an object that was seemingly so valuable to him. Minifees says, “the difference between what cars mean to most folks and what mine meant to me is the difference between knowing only the melody of a song and knowing the melody and the chords and the lyrics. Now I know what it meant to me from top to bottom.” Minifees closes by saying of his Cadillac, “now its gone and I’m free.” At the end of Part 1: Book 1 McIntyre confirms that he gained no understanding of Minifees when he thinks that he would have learned more from “trying to interview” the dead “body in the morgue” of the man who attempted to shoot the senator. (TBS, 227-230)

In the opening section of Three Days Before the Shooting…, Ellison presents the reader with a cautionary tale of how an artist’s intention can be completely misunderstood. Through McIntyre’s story, Ellison teaches the reader that in order to “dig” Ellison as an artist, his art cannot be taken at its surface meaning. Ellison asks the reader to go beyond a simple knowledge of “the melody” and to take into account “the melody and the chords and the lyrics.” In the same way that a song must be dissected in an attempt to uncover all of its layers and components, Ellison’s unfinished novel must be read and re-read, interpreted and reinterpreted in order to attain a full understanding of Ellison’s vision.
How to Dig

After Ellison presents the reader with his warning, he moves to the third person and the story begins to center around the journey of Reverend Alonzo Hickman, better known as “God’s Trombone.” In the ensemble of voices, Hickman is the high-flying soloist whom the story centers around. During a scene in a later section of the novel entitled “Hickman in Washington D.C.,” Ellison extends his lesson in order to reveal to the reader how to dig what the novel has to say. This scene describes Hickman as he studies a tapestry, which hangs in the lobby of a hotel. As Hickman attempts to find the meaning of the work of art, Ellison presents the reader with a blueprint for how to approach his own art. At first glance, Hickman witnesses a scene that portrays people doing menial tasks around a large body of water, however as Hickman continues to stare at the tapestry, he begins to question what he sees. Hickman slowly back away from the painting and suddenly remembers a game that he used to play as a jazzman:

He found himself recalling a forgotten game once played among jazz fans on those who disrupted concerts by arriving moments when an inspired jazzman was up and soaring. For then they were challenged to identify the original melody on which the soloist was riffing, and if they made a mistake in answering their punishment was gales of contemptuous laughter. It was strange that such as ancient landscape should make him recall such a game, but despite their differences of time and of place the weaver of the tapestry appeared to be testing his ability to discover some message or story which was woven in the landscape. If so, just as tardy jazz fans were challenged to mentally “hear” the original melody which inspired the jazzman’s soaring, he was now being invited to “see” and trace some hidden thread of a story which had been woven in threads. In other words, he thought, by “signifying” with his needle and thread this man is needling me to get to the point of the puzzle he’s woven!...

…For being artists, the goal of both the jazz musician and weaver was one of using their skills to arouse pleasure and wonder. And
both did so by drawing upon that which was left carefully understated or concealed as a means for achieving a transcendent goal. (*TBS*, 595)

Like jazzmen use notes and weavers use thread, writers of fiction use words to “arouse pleasure and wonder.” Ellison’s metaphor for “hear”-ing and “see”-ing can be extended to include “read”-ing and understanding. With this interpretation, the reader is presented with the way to find the “original melody” that has been left “understated or concealed” in Ellison’s prose. This description provides the reader with the tools necessary to “dig” what Ellison says and to avoid the trap into which McIntyre falls.

Hickman’s tapestry scene not only provides this blueprint for the reader, but also reveals Ellison actively riffing upon an “original melody” that the reader is challenged to uncover. Hickman’s brooding over a work of art in a hotel lobby calls to mind “The Spouter-Inn” from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. In this scene from Melville’s classic, Ishmael enters an eccentric inn where he is immediately presented with a troubling painting. Ishmael goes on to describe his observation of the painting as follows: “It was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose.”

In Hickman’s and Ishmael’s study of the different works of art, both authors present their blueprint for how to come to an understanding of their work. Ellison takes Melville’s blueprint a step further by actually providing an example of his technique of riffing off of a previous artist’s “original melody,” which is in this case Melville’s voice.

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3 *Melville: Moby-Dick* [M-D], 30
In his introduction to the collection of Melville’s short stories *Billy Budd and the Piazza Tales*, Robert G. O’Meally, who has done extensive work on Ellison, examines how Melville’s art contains a blues-like disposition before the blues had even coalesced into a discernible form. O’Meally says of Melville: “We might say that just as Buddy Bolden and Louis Armstrong helped crystallize these vernacular forms into a new American music, Melville helped crystallize them into a new American jazz/blues literature.”⁴ O’Meally’s vision of Melville as a writer of “jazz/blues literature” sets up Melville as a master of the tradition in which Ellison is engrossed. Like later jazz musicians who would build off of the riffs laid down by “Buddy Bolden and Louis Armstrong,” Ellison uses Melville’s riff from “The Spouter-Inn” and reinterprets it in order to get his own point across. In a letter that Ellison sent to his friend Albert Murray, Ellison says that *Moby-Dick* “is pervaded by the spirit of play, like real jazz sounds when a master is manipulating it. The thing’s full of riffs man…”⁵ Like Melville before him, Ellison is a “master” of “jazz sounds” who is able to manipulate words with a distinct “spirit of play.”

A jazz approach to *Three Days Before the Shooting*… reveals the way in which a reader can learn the chords and the lyrics of Ellison’s novel in progress. Through understanding that Ellison is riffing off of a previous master, Ellison’s blueprint for how to understand his work is read as an extension of Melville’s, which calls for a “diligent study and a series of systematic visits.” At the end of “The Spouter-Inn” chapter, Ishmael performs this “diligent study” when he meets Queequeg and consequently comes to the following conclusion about him: “the man’s a human being just like I am” (*M-D*, 40). Through this riff from Melville as well

⁴ O’Meally: “Whaling and Wailing” [WW], xxxix
⁵ Ellison: *Trading Twelves* [TT], 170
as through the character of McIntyre, Ellison provides for the reader examples of the “good reader” and the “bad reader.” Ishmael represents the good reader with his exhaustive approach and open mind, while McIntyre represents the bad reader with his ultra-rationalism and lack of empathy. A way in which the reader of Three Days Before the Shooting… can become a “good reader” is through the “diligent study” of digging up the riffs that are buried throughout the novel. This approach reveals how Ellison uses these riffs to fit his own unique voice into the larger tradition of jazz writers like Melville, which in turn allows the reader to gain a fuller understanding of Ellison as a writer. This thesis will dissect the solos, tunes, and voices that make up the vital portion of Ellison’s discography, Three Days Before the Shooting…, in an attempt to “dig” Ellison’s vision as an artist. The hopes are that this approach will provide a helpful framework for the novel that will encourage further readership and appreciation for the body of work that Ellison worked on for the majority of his life.
In the opening passage of the section “Hickman in Georgia & Oklahoma,” the Reverend Alonzo Zuber Hickman is brought a letter from Sister Wilhite, a member of his congregation. This letter is dark and foreboding and proves to be the crux on which the entire plot of the story hinges; however, before Hickman knows the contents of the letter, he and Sister Wilhite have the following conversation:

“Reveren’,” she said, “you busy?”
“Yes, ma’am, I am,” Hickman said, “I’m right in the middle of something.”
Sister Wilhite sniffed. “Middle,” she said, “you’re always in the middle. That’s your middle name…”
“No, ma’am, it’s Zuber, as you well know.”
“Yes, but you know what I mean. You’re always in the middle and forever pecking and scratching away on those sermons which you write down one way and then stand up there and preach the way you really feel. If you would write it the way you say it maybe folks would want to read it, but even if they didn’t you would surely save a heap of time.” (TBS, 663)

What first catches the eye (or ear) in this conversation is the odd insistence of Sister Wilhite in claiming that Reverend Hickman is “always in the middle.” Hickman also makes it clear that the Sister knows his middle name to be Zuber, yet she says that it is “Middle.” Ellison calls attention to Hickman’s name and claims that he is “always in the middle” in order to reveal a certain significance in the reverend’s title: “A Z Hickman.” The Sister’s rewriting of Hickman’s middle name not only puns on his constant activity of rewriting and rethinking, but it speaks to the significance of his social location as “always in the middle” (between “A” and “Z”).
Ellison often discussed the importance of names, most notably in “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” an essay in which Ellison struggles to make sense of his own name “Ralph Waldo Ellison.” In this essay, Ellison offers a way in which to treat one’s name by saying:

We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves, make them the center of all of our associations with the world, with man and with nature… They become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past (CE, 192).

Ellison saw names as vital to the development of one’s identity. Names provide a sense of stability in a world full of “noise and confusion” through their ability to establish a connection with one’s “familial past.” As a writer of fiction, Ellison becomes the creator of these “masks,” which his characters wear in his stories.

Hickman’s first two initials are at opposite ends of the alphabet and Sister Wilhite insists upon the fact that Hickman is always “in the middle.” Through the name “A Z Hickman,” Ellison appoints Hickman as a character who must “learn to wear” his “name” through finding the “middle” between extremes in life as represented by “A” and “Z.” Hickman’s ability to rest in the middle is most clearly seen in his identity as both a preacher and a former jazz musician. Three Days Before the Shooting… is filled with Hickman’s internal dialogues in which he ponders problems of the present by reflecting on lessons learned from his past. These lessons are attained through the gospel as well as through an improvisational sensibility, which Hickman attained during his youth as a jazz musician. In his ruminations, Hickman is able to come to conclusions that are only possible through the blending of the seemingly conflicting life philosophies of jazzman and preacher.

6 Ellison: The Collected Essays [CE], 195
During Hickman’s internal dialogues, Ellison often represents these two opposing life philosophies through a distinct difference in language, which sets up Hickman’s two sides as voices engaged in a conversation. Through their dialogues, the two voices, the preacher and the musician, come together in order to represent Hickman’s identity more completely. This meshing of voices is similar to when two jazz musicians with differing backgrounds and sets of influences combine their styles in order to create a tune that would not be complete if one of their voices were left out of the picture. In this sense, Ellison uses Hickman as his “instrument” with a timbre defined by Hickman’s ability to draw on both the sermonic and jazz traditions.

In the section entitled “Hickman in Washington D.C.,” Ellison solos through Hickman in an internal dialogue that reveals Hickman’s deep connection to the jazz tradition. During the passage, Hickman reminisces about his time spent in the “St. Louis Square in New Orleans in springtime” when he ran across jazz legends such as “Ma Rainey,” “Jelly Roll Morton,” Jimmy Rushing,” and “King Oliver” (TBS, 583). As this scene wavers in his mind, he is reminded of an old tune that he used to play entitled “Stackalee.”

Still, it was a good ole swinging tune. And amusing too, even though based on a terrible incident... A ballad? No. More a blues-ballad or ballad-blues—but in those days who needed such fancy names? It sure wasn’t an anthem or a hymning tune—Hey now, Mister Preacher! Oh yes, I’m guilty! Even made up my own version. Added all those blams and slams. What was it called? Didn’t know then but learned much later and still can’t remember... “rim shooting?” No fool, “rim shots” like I said—though probably then not in the dictionary. But the audience knew what was going on, Rim Shots, as in the sound of pistols and sudden death; the agony of dying, farewell to life and death’s confusion, the bang that ends the clamoring world... Yes, and the knock of conscience and the roar of John Law the Tax Collector and Uncle Sam the Regulator... How did I have it? (TBS, 583-584)
The conversation between Reverend Hickman’s two selves, the preacher and its alter ego, the jazzman, begins when his jazz-voice calls out “Hey now, Mister Preacher!” and the preacher responds “Oh yes, I’m guilty!” The preacher and the jazzman then riff off of each other as they attempt to recall the nuances of Hickman’s version of “Stackalee,” including the “rim shots” played by the drummer. “Stackalee” is a traditional American song that has been interpreted numerous times by artists such as Ma Rainey, Duke Ellington, Sidney Bechet and Woody Guthrie. The song tells the story of “Stag” Lee Shelton who shot Billy Lyons in St. Louis in 1895 (Abrahams, 123). Each artist who has played the tune interprets it in different ways through adjusting the lyrics, the tempo, or the musical texture of the song. In the above passage, Ellison invents his “own version” of the song, which he plays through Reverend Hickman. Ellison’s interpretation of the tune is given an individual stamp through the “rim shots,” which are played in order to evoke the sound heard when Stag Lee shot Billy Lyons. Hickman’s preacher persona goes on to ask “How did I have it?,” and the jazzman gives the following response:

Well a-rooty-toot-toot, I heard Stackalee shoot! And the drummer going Blam-blam-blam! Blam-blam blam! Folks doing sixty in shoe and boot (Blam-blam blam!) They call for the sherriff / and his Black Maria / (Blam-blam blam!) Stackalee starts running for that Dixie flyer / (Blam-blam blam!) Billy’s lying dead / Bleeding from his head / (Blam-blam blam! Blam-blam blam!) After pleading for his life / for his children and wife / (Blam-blam blam! Blam-blam blam!) Billy’s poor lil wife / She’s sick in bed / (Blam-blam blam! Blam-blam blam!) (TBS, 584)

When the above passage is read orally, Ellison’s words evoke the sound of a small jazz group playing with a singer the likes of Ma Rainey. Armed with Hickman as an instrument, Ellison is able to interpret an American standard not at the
bandstand but on the page. Hickman’s take on the standard most closely resembles Duke Ellington’s version of the tune “Stack O’Lee Blues,” which begins with isolated cymbal hits played by the drummer that are similar to the rim shots in Ellison’s interpretation. Yet, Ellison takes Ellington’s technique a step further and has the drummer play the hits throughout the entire tune in order to stress the evocation of a gun being fired. The fact that Ellison gives a nod to Ellington through Reverend Hickman is significant because Ellison believed that the Duke represented an important connection between the religious and the secular. In the essay, “Homage to Duke Ellington on his Birthday,” Ellison touches on this connection:

My mother, an Afro-American Methodist Episcopalian who shouted in church but allowed me nevertheless to leave sunrise Christmas services to attend breakfast dances, once expressed the hope that when I had completed my musical studies I would have a band like Ellington’s. I was pleased and puzzled at the time, but now I suspect that she recognized a certain religious element in Ellington’s music, an element which has now blossomed forth in compositions of his own form of liturgical music. (CE, 683)

Much like Reverend Hickman, Ellington moved towards religion at an older age by way of the “liturgical music” that he composed later in his life. Ellison saw a life philosophy that came forth in Ellington’s compositions, which Ellison says “warned us not only to look at the darker side of life, but also to remember the enduring necessity for humor, technical mastery, and creative excellence” (CE, 681). Hickman and Ellington share in their ability to comfortably fall in the “middle” and understand the “darker side” as well as the “necessity for humor, technical mastery, and creative excellence” as taught to them by the jazz tradition.

After Hickman reminisces upon his version of “Stackalee,” he questions the need to remember his past, because, while he was a jazz musician, he lived a

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lifestyle that directly conflicts with his current system of values as a preacher. During this passage, Hickman comments on the ability of some women in his congregation to block out the memory of their own sinful youth. Hickman contrasts his situation with the sisters when he says:

*The main difference is that unlike the sisters I was cursed—or blessed—with a memory that forces me to remember things which they’ve managed to put aside. For all of us the song is ended, but for me its melody clings to my mind. And who knows, maybe the sisters’ blackout of memory is a blessing that’s left them less troubled in mind and more secure in their struggle with sin...*  

And yet, as he watched a laughing group of young people in the lobby, he questioned the sister’s stance of unquestionable rectitude. Especially Sister Gipson’s. For while they were steadfast in their belief and conduct it was possible that the virtues of charity and sympathy depend as much upon one’s memory of the past as one’s hopes for heaven. Yes, and perhaps true conscientiousness depended upon one’s ability to retain in memory—and without hypocritical regrets—the complex motives that led to a change in one’s worldly ways. *(TBS, 588)*

Hickman makes a conscious decision to draw on the values and traditions of both gospel and jazz in order to attain “true conscientiousness.” Through his youthful jazz side, Hickman is able to relate to the “laughing group of young people,” while at the same time he can understand the position of “Sister Gipson” through his life as a reverend. In order to live in the “middle,” Hickman roots himself firmly in the present between his “memory of the past” and his “hopes for heaven.” Ellison represents this outlook through riffs that incorporate both the sacred and the secular, as well as through his self-positioning as an artist in the tradition of Duke Ellington, a figure whose life trajectory was similar to that of Reverend Hickman.
Part 2: The Juneteenth Sermon

Internal dialogues represent only one form through which Ellison makes use of Hickman’s voice as an instrument in his jazz-text. In Part I: Book II, Ellison provides the reader with entire sermons that are remembered and recreated by Reverend Hickman. Like the internal dialogues, these sermons show Hickman’s virtuosic ability to improvise with words as he riffs on both scripture and music. The clearest representation of Hickman’s unique style of preaching is seen when Hickman plays his trombone at the climax of many of his sermons. This technique embodies Hickman’s equal use of all of his experiences learned from his past in order to create a greater, more unique form of expression.

Possibly the most profound of all of Hickman’s sermons is one which he gave on the holiday of Juneteenth, which celebrates the liberation of slaves in America. Ellison presents this sermon as a shared memory at the bedside of Senator Sunraider after he has been shot, and Hickman has come to his aid. Long before the senator became Sunraider, he was known as “Bliss,” the boy raised by Hickman in Oklahoma to become a preacher. During this time, Hickman and Bliss traveled throughout the southeast as itinerant preachers performing at revival meetings. In Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America, Horace A. Porter comments on the structure of the “Juneteenth” sermon: “Daddy Hickman’s sermon is a staged duet; his apprentice, the young Rev. Bliss…plays the role of Hickman’s accompanist. He ‘comps’ (as a pianist plays along while a soloist sings) by coming in and out as necessary, asking leading questions, repeating responses…” (Porter, 112). Ellison immediately sets up the sermon as a “duet” when Sunraider/Bliss remembers the following: “Amen! They all responded and I looked preacher-faced into their shining-
eyes, preparing my piccolo voice to support his baritone sound” (*TBS*, 315). This statement frames Bliss, the “piccolo,” as playing the “accompanist” role for the more experienced soloist Reverend Hickman, the “baritone.” The sermon follows a general form of call and response where Bliss asks a “leading question” that is followed up by Hickman declaring an answer. Bliss then reaffirms this answer either through repetition or through a religious response such as “Amen!”

The narrative of the sermon tells the story of slavery from its beginnings when Africans were brought across the Atlantic and, in Hickman’s words, left “eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, songless, hornless, soundless, sightless, dayless, nightless, wrongless, rightless, motherless, fatherless—scattered” (*TBS*, 319). At this moment of despair, Hickman and Bliss begin to riff off of each other as they turn their message towards redemption.

At first, Rev. Bliss, he said, his trombone entering his voice, broad, somber, and noble. At first, ah, but though divided and scattered, ground down and battered into the earth like a spike being pounded by a ten-pound sledge, we were on the ground and in the earth and the earth was red and black like the earth of Africa. And as we moldered underground we were mixed with this land. We liked it. It fitted us fine. It was in us and we were in it. And then—praise God—deep in the ground, deep in the womb of this land, we began to stir!

Praise God!
At last, Lord, at last!
Amen!
Oh the truth, Lord, it tastes so sweet!
What was it like then, Rev. Bliss? You read the scriptures, so tell us! Give us a word.

WE WERE LIKE THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES!
Amen. Like the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel’s dream. We lay scattered in the ground for a long dry season. And the winds blew and the sun came down and the rains came and went and we were dead. Lord, we were dead! Except…Except… Except for what, Rev. Hickman?
Except for one nerve left from our ear… (*TBS*, 320)
Hickman’s “trombone” “enters his voice,” and the sermon is brought out of utter despair and into a vision of hope and transcendence. The two reverends’ voices have different timbres, Bliss’s “piccolo” and Hickman’s “baritone,” but they carry on each other’s ideas in order to blend into one, more powerful instrument of expression. Ellison compliments this combination of voices through his lack of quotation marks and speaker identification, which makes Bliss and Hickman’s words less distinguishable from one another. During this section of the sermon, Reverend Bliss begins to take an increasingly dominant role as he begins to answer questions rather than simply ask them. This change positions Bliss less as an “accompanist” and reveals him as another soloist who shares the stage with Rev. Hickman. The two preachers’ performance is evocative of a jazz duet in which one of two musicians might use call and response to repeat or carry on a line played by the other musician. In such an instance, the soprano saxophone player, the “piccolo” timbre, would play an opening line over four bars. Then the “baritone voice” of the bass trombone would come in and play a slightly varied version of the original idea introduced by the sax. In jazz, this technique allows a melodic idea to have time to settle with the listener. In the moment when Bliss is allowed to take on a soloist’s role, he responds, “IN THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES.” Hickman repeats this line but adds “in Ezekiel's dream,” and allows Bliss’s climactic riff to settle and resonate with the congregation.

The revival described during the “Juneteenth” sermon has a relaxed environment with a responsive audience that is akin to the jam sessions of jazz clubs common during Ellison’s time. For jazz musicians, the jam session provided an atmosphere where players could experiment and develop their voice. In Ellison's
essay, “The Golden Age, Time Past,” he reflects on the importance of the jam session in the jazz tradition:

...the jam session is revealed as the jazzman’s true academy. It is here that he learns tradition, group techniques and style….Here it is more meaningful to speak not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation, ceremonies of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz—the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles—he must then ‘find himself,’ must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity. ⁸

The Juneteenth sermon represents Bliss’s ceremony of initiation. At first he plays the supporting role for Hickman, but in doing so he practices the art of performance and learns Hickman's language in preparation for his moment to solo. Bliss perfects the “traditional techniques” of the oratorical tradition through yelling “Amen!” and “Praise God!” instead of learning the “intonations” or “mute work” of the jazz tradition. Bliss must also master the Gospel as his “body of traditional styles.” In the way that a jazz musician practices idiomatic riffs or phrases, Bliss must put in the time to become well versed in the Gospel, and it is through this attainment of knowledge that Bliss is able to pass Hickman’s test and correctly answer “IN THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES!”

In the same way that Ellison riffs upon Melville and Ellington in the passages described earlier, Ellison hides another reference in Bliss’ response, “in the valley of dry bones.” One of the most well known sermons given by the preacher and civil rights leader Reverend C.L. Franklin is entitled “Dry Bones in The Valley” (Franklin, ⁸ Ellison: Living With Music [LWM], 61
80. In *Jazz Country*, Horace A. Porter points out that Ellison was “well aware of the Reverend C.L. Franklin” and his “dry bones in the valley sermon,” which was broadcasted around the time that this passage was written (Porter, 108). In Reverend Franklin’s version of “Dry Bones in the Valley,” he, like Hickman, draws connections between the biblical story and the struggle of African Americans during slavery. Both preachers reach the climax of their sermon through evoking the image of bones in the valley slowly coming together until a body is created, however the final conclusion of the two reverends is fundamentally different. Reverend Franklin ends the prose section of his sermon by saying, “That *son of man* seemed to be reminiscent of man’s limitations, man’s finiteness, man’s humanity. Son of man. Son of man…” (Franklin, 82). By repeating the phrase “son of man,” Franklin focuses on the limitations of mankind and the need to rely upon God for an answer to one’s problems. Alternatively, Reverend Hickman attempts to provide transcendence through more earthly means in the following passage:

...We were rebirthed from the earth of this land and revivified by the Word. So now we had a new language and a brand new song to put flesh on our bones…
New teeth, new tongue, new Word, new song!
.... Remember that when the labor’s backbreaking and the boss man’s mean our singing can lift us up.... Keep to the rhythm and you’ll keep to life. God’s time is long: And all short-haul horses shall be like horses on a merry-go-round. Keep, keep, keep, to the rhythm and you won’t get weary. Keep to the rhythm and you won’t get lost. (*TBS*, 321-322)

Like Reverend Franklin, Hickman places importance on “the Word,” but he extends his vision of hope to include a “new song.” Hickman goes on to tell his people that if they “keep to the rhythm” they will “keep to life.” The differences between the two reverends’ conclusions again reveal the vital importance of Hickman’s role as a jazz-preacher. Hickman understands the power of music to
provide people with the endurance necessary to survive, so Ellison is able to use Hickman to combine jazz and spirituality into a unique vision of transcendence.

Reverend Hickman plays a vital role for Ellison as a voice with the ability to riff upon influences as seemingly disparate as Duke Ellington and Reverend C.L. Franklin. Through Hickman, Ellison combines the spiritual and the secular in order to highlight how the jazz solo and the sermon are closely tied. Ellison alludes to this connection in his essay, “Remembering Jimmy,” which reflects on the legacy of the great blues/jazz singer Jimmy Rushing. In the essay, Ellison reveals the connection between the jazz performance and the church service:

Now that’s the Right Reverend Jimmy Rushing preaching now, man,” someone would say. And rising to the cue another would answer, “Yeah, and that’s old Elder ‘Hot Lips’ signifying along with him, urging him on, man.” And keeping it building, “Huh, but though you can’t hear him out this far, Ole Deacon Big-un [the late Walter Page] is up there padding his foot and slapping on his big belly [the bass viol] to keep those fools in line.” And we might name all the members of the band as though they were Biblical four-and-twenty elders, while laughing at the impious wit of applying church titles to a form of music which all the preachers assured us was the devil’s potent tool. Our wit was true, for Jimmy Rushing, along with the other jazz musicians whom we knew, had made a choice, had dedicated himself to a mode of expression and a way of life no less “righteously” than others dedicated themselves to the church. Jazz and the Blues did not fit into the scheme of things as spelled out by our two main institutions, the church and the school, but they gave expression to attitudes which found no place in these and helped to give our lives some semblance of wholeness. Jazz and the public dance was a third institution in our lives, and a vital one, and though Jimmy was far from being a preacher, he was, as official floor manager of master-of-the-dance at Slaughter’s Hall, the leader of a public rite. (CE, 275)

Through this fictional dialogue, Ellison positions the members of the big band “The Oklahoma City Blue Devils” as “Biblical Elders” who preach to the crowd on their respective instruments. Even though religious leaders insist that jazz is the
“devil’s potent tool,” Ellison finds common ground between the preacher and the musician through the fact that both professions require a person to dedicate his life to a “mode of expression.” In the above passage, Ellison uncovers the spiritual elements of a jazz performance at Slaughter’s Hall. Similarly, Ellison uses the “Juneteenth” sermon as a way to reveal the jazz elements of a religious performance. The sermon and the jazz dance are both “public rites” in which people come together in order to share in a communal form of expression. The congregation in the church service sings and gives words of affirmation to the preacher who improvises off of their input. Similarly, at a jazz show the players adjust their phrases in order to rhythmically correspond to the audience’s contribution as dancers.

The three institutions as laid out by Ellison—the church, the school, and the jazz performance—are fused together in *Three Days Before the Shooting*… The voices from each are resonated in Hickman’s performance, with Reverend Franklin representing the church and oral tradition; Duke Ellington, the jazz performance and musical idioms; and Melville, the school and written word. Through a jazz interpretation of the text, Reverend Hickman’s passages are understood as jazz solos in which Hickman riffs off of each of these masters and their respective traditions. Like a jazz soloist, Hickman fluidly and subtly combines riffs from many different sources in order to create his own voice as an individual artist.
II. The Letters of
Janey Glover and Walker Milesap
Part 1: Janey

Following the discussion that takes place between Reverend Hickman and Sister Wilhite at the beginning of the section entitled “Hickman in Georgia & Oklahoma,” Hickman goes on to read letters sent to him from two different friends. These letters are the first of several major “solos” that appear in this section and are played by characters other than Reverend Hickman. The letters represent another form, like that of the sermon and internal dialogue, through which Ellison gives his characters the opportunity to show off their virtuosity with words. Janey Glover, a woman with whom Hickman used to have an intimate relationship, is the author of the first letter. Janey begins her letter by advising Hickman that he will need to use his musical sensibilities in order to fully understand what she is trying to tell him.

I smile when I write this because anybody who can read those little fly specky music notes like you ought to be able to read anything. I surely hope so, as I am going to try and give you the feel of things, and since they are speeding up I hope you will give it your full attention. Besides, you will remember that you used to give me the devil, because I did not write much in my letters, and said for folks who knew how to put pen to paper but did not was a sin. (TBS, 666)

As opposed to classical composition, notated jazz music is often minimalist in representation in order to allow instrumentalists a certain freedom of interpretation. Like a jazz composer, Janey takes this minimalist approach in writing her letter, and tells Hickman that she is only going to give him “the feel of things.” It is then up to Hickman as an experienced jazz musician who can “read anything” to interpret the meaning of her story.
True to her word, Janey’s letter proves to be full of symbolic dreams and allusions that require much thought on the part of Hickman to untangle. Janey’s stories in the letter speak of omens that have confronted her in the past months, leading her to believe that trouble is upon her. The first omen she recalls is a dream in which she witnesses a burning house with helpless people inside. This dream foreshadows a later occurrence when, during a funeral for one of her friends, a hearse catches fire, leaving the coffined corpse in ashes. This experience is jarring for Janey, and leads her to believe that the occurrence foreshadows more terrible events to come. In order to make clear to Hickman the significance of the hearse catching fire, Janey makes the following statement:

Now, I think you will understand how we felt over such a thing happening when you remember how in your days out here you musicians used to leave the church and march the body to the graveyard playing dignified and slow, but then after the burial was over and done you all would lift the mourners’ spirits by strutting back to town horraying and sassing the devil. That’s when you liked to play such sinful low down trash as that “They Picked Poor Robin Clean,” and “Oh Didn’t He Ramble.” (TBS, 671).

In this passage, Janey calls upon Hickman’s past as a musician to show how the burning of the hearse interrupted the people’s ability to move from the state of mourning a life into the celebration of a life. Janey makes reference to two jazz standards in order to further explain her point. These two tunes, “They Picked Poor Robin Clean” and “Oh Didn’t He Ramble,” have a special connection with funerals that Ellison describes in his essay on Charlie Parker entitled “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz.”

“Back during the thirties members of the old Blue Devils Orchestra celebrated a certain robin by playing a lugubrious little tune called ‘They Picked Poor Robin Clean.’ It was a jazz-
community joke, musically an extended ‘signifying riff’ or melodic naming of a recurring human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand. Sometimes it was played as the purple-fezzed musicians returned from the burial of an Elk, whereupon reaching the Negro business and entertainment district the late Walter Page would announce the melody dolefully on his tuba; then poor robin would transport the mourners from their somber mood to the spirit lifting beat of ‘Oh, didn’t he ramble’ or some other happy tune.”

(CE, 265)

Janey makes references to these songs in her letter and is able to assume that Hickman will know what she is talking about because he is part of the “jazz-community” and will get the “joke.” Janey represents the state of mourning with the “lugubrious little tune,” “They Picked Poor Robin Clean” and the state of celebration with the “happy tune,” “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble.” Janey’s references are subtle, but she uses them with the knowledge that they will help Hickman to understand how the burning of the coffin leaves her in an unnatural state.

Janey further describes this jarring moment by saying, “We were numb and dumb, shaken to our very roots. And who wouldn’t be, with old Death erupting in the form of fire to claim twice over the blessed and prayed for but still uncommitted dead? And I mean even before the minister could say his Ashes-to-ashes-and-Dust-to-dust!” (TBS, 671). The end of this paragraph subtly riffs upon a specific recording of “Oh Didn’t He Ramble” by Sidney Bechet. During this version of the tune, Bechet acts out the scene of a funeral by beginning the song with a funeral march that is reminiscent of “They Picked Poor Robin Clean.” A member of the band then says, “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. If the women don’t get ya, the liquor must!” This line leads into a drum roll that explodes into the joyful tune of “Oh Didn’t He Ramble.” Ellison thus uses the “signifying riff” of these two tunes in order to lead the reader not

9 Bechet, Sidney and Jelly Roll Morton. "Oh, Didn't He Ramble." 1939.
only to one of his own essays, but to a jazz recording as well. As a character
engulfed in the jazz tradition, Hickman is able to pick up on all of these references in
order to get “the feel of things” and understand the significance of the omens that
Janey describes.

Janey believes her omens to be fulfilled with the ominous return of one of her foster children to Oklahoma. Janey informs Hickman upon his arrival to Oklahoma that this child, Severen, is the result of a white, smooth-talking moviemaker who took advantage of and impregnated a young African American woman. This man then left town, and the mother, deeply ashamed, eventually committed suicide. Due to this situation, Janey herself took on the responsibility of raising Severen in Oklahoma. Janey tells Hickman when he later sees her in person that in the boy’s childhood he was taken away by his father’s white lawyer, “Mr. Delano,” to live in the North (TBS, 746-748). The use of the name “Delano” reveals Ellison once again riffing upon the works of Herman Melville, specifically the novella “Benito Cereno” in which one of the central characters is named “Captain Amasa Delano.”

Ellison uses Melville’s character as a prototype to inform the conception of his own character that shares many characteristics with Melville’s sailor.

Captain Delano is described early on in Melville’s story as “a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature...not liable to indulge in personal alarms, anyway involving the imputation of malign evil in man” (BB, 152). Delano holds true to his nature, as he is unable to realize that the troubled ship, which he boards in order to offer his help, has actually been overtaken by a slave revolt. Throughout the story, Delano is constantly offered evidence of this slave revolt; however, Delano is blinded

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10 Melville: *Billy Budd and the Piazza Tales* [BB], 151
by his preconceptions of the slaves as docile servants who live to serve the captain
of the ship, Benito Cereno. This attitude is especially evident when Delano describes
Cereno’s personal servant, Babo, as “less a servant than a devoted companion,”
and Babo turns out to be the organizer and leader of the ship's slave revolt.

Ellison’s “Mr. Delano” proves to fit into the Captain Delano prototype from the
moment of his arrival to Oklahoma. Mr. Delano makes his trip out west in order to
take Severen to live with his wealthy father whose previous role had only included an
anonymous check sent to Janey each month. Janey tells Mr. Delano that she does
not know what to tell the child because Severen had been under the impression that
he did not have a father since his birth. Mr. Delano gives the following response: “Oh
you'll find a way. Since you care for the boy and its to his advantage… his father,
 instructed me to tell you how much he appreciates what you’ve done for the boy, and
he regrets that he won’t be able to tell you in person. And naturally, he expects to
reward you… And you can take my word that he’ll be most generous” (TBS, 747).

Mr. Delano’s naivety is essentially the same as Captain Delano’s through the fact
that he sees Janey as simply a full-time nanny who had raised Severen only for the
money in the checks that Severen’s father had sent her. Janey reveals how she truly
feels when she says to Hickman, “It was like they thought I had been taking care of
that child for that low-down floater instead of trying to do my Christian duty. And I
mean for the child and for his poor dead mother. I did it on my own” (TBS, 748). Just
as Captain Delano believed that Babo lived to serve Benito Cereno, Mr. Delano
mistakenly perceives Janey as a servant who raised Severen for the sake of his
father.

Through Janey’s letter to Hickman, Ellison illustrates how an insider such as
Hickman is able to interpret subtle jazz references in order to better understand “the
feel of things” in Janey’s letter. Ellison makes use of this model when he offers the name “Delano” and assumes that readers familiar with Ellison will pick up on the reference because the epigraph from *Invisible Man* quotes from “Benito Cereno.” Ellison uses the name of “Delano” as a type of “signifying riff” to lead the experienced reader to consider Melville’s character Captain Amasa Delano. This technique is similar to the before mentioned riff from “They Picked Poor Robin Clean” that was picked up by Hickman, the experienced *listener*, and which Ellison describes as a “melodic naming of a recurring human situation” (*CE*, 265). In this case, the “recurring human situation” is that of the two Delanos who represent the persistence of the ignorant white patron.
Janey’s letter leaves Hickman in a state of confusion and contemplation. While in this state, he has an odd urge to dig up an old letter that he received in the past from a man named Walker Milsap. This letter was sent to Hickman in fulfillment of a favor that Hickman had asked of Milsap: to look for a boy who fitted the description of Bliss, who had run away from Hickman shortly before he wrote to Milsap. In his response, Milsap documents a period of several years in which he was able to track the whereabouts of a boy of Bliss’ description. This letter is vital as it foreshadows the fact that Bliss is actually the man whom Janey described as the father of the mysterious boy Severen, but when Hickman reads the letter he only has a sneaking feeling that this is true.

Along with this plot point, the letter presents Milsap as another instrumentalist with a unique voice of his own. Before Hickman reads the letter, he introduces Milsap as a former jazz musician turned college professor who “might have ended up with one of the big bands” if “he’d been more interested in music than in books and his abstract ideas” (TBS, 682). With a background in “music” and “books,” Milsap provides Ellison with the opportunity to riff on both the musical and academic worlds. In the same way that Hickman’s timbre is defined by jazz and the gospel, Milsap’s timbre brings together the traditions of jazz and academia.

In the opening section of Milsap’s letter, he describes the nature of his investigation into the boy of Hickman’s description, which reveals Milsap’s important outlook on the situation. The passage reads as follows:

Still, you were certainly shrewd in asking someone with my inclinations to play detective. For while I had an endless curiosity about the unseen underside of this country it was too restricted in
its range and you provided the opportunity for me to extend it. And to my surprise I found myself going about playing your detective-observer in such a fashion—and enjoying it—that it seemed fairly natural. What’s more, by getting me out of the library and into the streets the experience proved helpful in pursuing my studies, and for that I thank you. (TBS, 683)

In the above passage, Milsap introduces himself as a student of the “unseen underside” of the United States, and in doing so he sets up a discourse in which he goes on to draw broad connections between seemingly disparate aspects of American culture. The bulk of Milsap’s letter makes use of these connections in an attempt to describe Bliss’ relationship with a man named “Mississippi Brown,” who is also known as “Sippy.” Milsap sets up Sippy as a “trickster” who is “so tricky that he could walk straight through a plate-glass window without a scratch” (TBS, 687, 689).

In an attempt to clearly evoke Sippy’s character, Milsap relates him to several figures in American history and literature who Milsap sees as predecessors to Sippy in their role as masters of deception and trickery. Through this section of the letter, Ellison uses Milsap to riff upon history, literature, and jazz and in doing so brings together these traditions in an exploration of the trickster character type.

The figure that Milsap examines first is a man named “William Lee” who was a slave of and personal valet to George Washington. Milsap makes use of different portraits of George Washington that include William Lee in them in order to describe Lee’s relationship to the general.

Because the embodiment of that “shadow” is none other than the man who had been the young boy who appears in the first painting…His name was William Lee, and though no member of the family he, he’s there because the general must have insisted that his friend and companion through war and peace be included to give depth to the scene and convey some of its historical complexity. Who knows, maybe Washington recognized that Lee performed an important service which, for one in his own historic position, could be rendered best by a man beyond the pale… So it
is that not only does Lee deepen the painting’s historical perspective but foreshadows other “shadows” to come. (*TBS*, 688)

Milsap dives into the “unseen underside” of American history through his contemplation of the relatively unrecognized William Lee. Milsap further positions Lee as a figure who “foreshadows” a reoccurring character type in American history that Milsap describes as “shadows.” In his book, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal*, Fritz Hirschfield describes the biography of William Lee through different documents written by or connected to George Washington. In brief, Lee was the personal valet of President Washington from 1768, when he was purchased, until 1793, when Washington was forced to find a replacement valet due to injuries that had occurred to Lee. During this time, Lee is said to have been constantly by Washington’s side during the “most exciting periods of his career,” including the American Revolution. Due to his courage during the war, Lee was freed by Washington in his will and granted a yearly pension for the remainder of his life. After Hirschfield’s exploration of Lee, he describes Lee as a man of “courage,” “intelligence,” “poise,” and “sensitivity” who, had he been “a white man, he would have an honored place in American history” (Hirschfield, 111).

Like Milsap, Hirschfield calls attention to the significance of Billy Lee’s presence in the portrait entitled *The Washington Family*. Hirschfield assumes the reason for this inclusion by writing: “Although technically a slave, because of his loyalty to his master and his long faithful service, Billy Lee was accorded a special and prominent position in the Washington household, which brought him a place in *The Washington Family*” (Hirschfield, 98). Milsap agrees with Hirschfield in his speculation as to why Washington chose to include Lee as the only non-member of
his family in the portrait. However, Milsap takes the analysis a step further when he concentrates on Lee’s own identity rather than Washington’s view of him.

Because if I know anything about our people, old Bill had his eyes and ears wide open to what’s going down and nobody, not even the surveyor, slave-owner, general, and father of our country knew what the hell he was thinking… Black William Lee was with George Washington for thirty-one years, during which time an undeclared independence of observation was, perhaps, his only self-defining area of freedom. But don’t forget that although a slave he was still privy to many matters having to do with affairs of family, state, and politics. And if interested, he may have used his shadowy position as unsurveyed landscape for self-exploration, or a dimly lit stage which to perform the kind of play-acting which is the specialty of the type I mentioned above. (TBS, 688-689)

Milsap argues that the “landscape” of the mind of William Lee was one in which even the great “surveyor” George Washington had to leave “unsurveyed.” Billy Lee asserted his autonomy through exercises of the mind that were fed by the “affairs of family, state, and politics” with which he was constantly confronted. Billy was forced to create his own “undeclared independence of observation,” because his rightful freedom as stated in the Declaration of Independence had been denied him due to his status as a slave. Milsap’s portrayal of Lee provides an identity for Billy that is more nuanced and complex than a simple portrayal of a loyal servant to the president. Milsap’s analysis positions Lee as one of the “shadowy” characters in American history who put on masks of servility in a “play-acting” game, which allows them to further their stock in life and assert their self-recognized independence.

The next “shadow” that Milsap comments upon shows his ability to riff upon the jazz tradition. Milsap came into contact with this character during his investigation into Bliss and Sippy’s relationship, and he describes the experience as follows:
Shortly after our long-distance conversation I happened to pass a music-store window in which was a publicity photograph for Ted Lewis’ version of ‘Me and My Shadow,’ wherein a strutting Lewis wearing a top-hat, tails, and silk lined cape is pointing his clarinet as he plays pied piper to the little brown-skinned boy whom he featured in his act as ‘Ted Lewis Junior.’ Dressed in miniature top-hat and tails, the kid enacts his role of ‘shadow’ a short distance behind his partner, and as he dances to Lewis’ reedy noodling he has a signifying grin on his face which reminded me of the way young William Lee grinned when eyeing the raised tail of George Washington’s horse. (TBS, 690)

Through his analysis of the American “shadows,” Milsap draws connections between two characters in history that seemingly have little in common. Both of these characters appear in portraits in which, at first glance, they are given a secondary status, but Milsap dives into their humanity through his examination of their shared “signifying grins.” These subtle facial expressions reveal that these two men have much more going in their heads than anyone would have previously given them credit for.11

Milsap extends his riff to include literature when he notes the presence of several pairs of tricksters in American literature with characters the likes of: “Uncle Remus and his little white friend, Uncle Tom and Little Eva, Captain Ahab and his cabin boy, and especially those famous runaways, poor white and slave, Huck Finn and Jim” (TBS, 691). In this passage, Ellison draws special attention to Mark Twain’s characters Huck and Jim from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; a novel that Ellison references and comments upon in several of his essays. In a recent edition of Huckleberry Finn, Robert G. O’Meally presents an introduction entitled “Blues for Huckleberry” that places Mark Twain in the jazz/blues literary tradition.12 In his introduction, O’Meally conceives of Twain’s novel as filled with blues-toned

11 See page 58 of this thesis for images.
12 See page 11 of this thesis.
improvisations that are played mainly through Huck, whom O’Meally calls a “blues-hero.” In the same way that he places Melville as a forerunner to the jazz/blues-literature tradition, O’Meally deems Twain as a writer of blues-fiction in the following passage:

Was it possible to think of *Huckleberry Finn* as a blues novel in the tradition of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*? (Ellison always named Twain as a key influence, despite the problems that he saw in the great novel.)… Listening to Johnson, and then to Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington… I heard a story ringing true to the one in *Huckleberry Finn*: a journey toward freedom against insurmountable odds undertaken for the sake of a yearning for an often impossible love, with a readiness to improvise as the sole means of supporting the hope of that love… for the American promise to be realized, everyone must learn not only to go it alone, to solo, but also to make music together with others, to swing. This, at this profoundest level, is what Huckleberry Finn learns to do. Huck learns how to solo, and like a true bluesman, he learns to *swing*. (*BH*, xxvi)

In order to show the way in which Huck is a blues soloist, O’Meally later calls attention to the scene in *Huckleberry Finn* when Huck dresses as “Sarah Williams from Hookerville” in order to gain information about the men who are hunting down Jim. When Huck is discovered to be a boy, he changes his story and claims to be an orphan. This display of improvisation reveals Huck as a soloist who, in O’Meally’s words, “fills the vivid breaks in the action with invented phrases, gestures, and disguises” (*BH*, XXXIII). This vision of the trickster as a musician and master of improvisation raises figures such as Billy Lee and Huck to the level of virtuosic performer.

O’Meally’s musical understanding of the trickster brings to light the significance of the pairs in American literature to which Milsap makes reference. These characters, such as Huck Finn or Uncle Remus, are each individual tricksters

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13 O’Meally: “Blues for Huckleberry” [*BH*], XXX
who improvise or “solo” in order to survive. As these characters develop, they become engaged in relationships with members of another race, which in Uncle Remus’s case is “his little white friend” and in Huck’s case is the slave, Jim. Through their relationships, these characters must learn “to swing” with others while they solo and, in doing so, are forced to recognize the humanity of their musical partners. In Huck’s previously mentioned “solo,” he decides to put on a disguise and improvise in order to look out for the safety of his friend Jim. This scene shows Huck moving from a character who acts as a trickster for selfish reasons to one who improvises in order to help others. When this transition is considered in O’Meally’s blues framework, Huck begins to learn how to swing with others as he solos.

After his introduction of Sippy as a character in the tradition of the trickster, Milsap goes on to explain how Sippy took on Bliss as an apprentice of deception. Bliss’s time spent with Sippy explains the reason for his transformation into a figure that takes on disguise after disguise until he has created a final identity for himself as the United States Senator, Adam Sunraider. The decision to place Sippy as a trickster is vital in providing an understanding of how the radical transformation could occur in Bliss’s identity in which he began as a young white boy raised to be a preacher by a black community only to become a race-baiting senator.

Milsap’s riffs that draw upon the tricksters in literature serve a second function that is brought to light through O’Meally’s reading of *Huckleberry Finn*. O’Meally presents Mark Twain as another canonical author of American jazz/blues literature in the same way that he did with Herman Melville. Through his use of the virtuosic trickster figure, Sippy, and his noted connection with figures in past literature such as Huck Finn, Ellison brings forth Mark Twain as another author who fits into the jazz/blues literary tradition. This broader conception of the trickster figure allows
Ellison to provide the context necessary to explain the complex identity of Bliss/Sunraider.
III. The Oral Accounts of Love New and Cliofus

Part 1: Love New

The letters of Janey Glover and Walker Milsap compel Reverend Hickman to travel to Oklahoma in order to unravel the mysterious Severen and his possible identity as the neglected son of Bliss, whom Hickman raised years ago. This journey west leads Hickman to discover two characters that both provide him with information about Severen’s identity as well as lead him to profound moments of discovery. During their conversations with Hickman, these two characters, Love New and Cliofus, perform oral narratives that each span nearly a hundred pages. These oral accounts allow Ellison the opportunity to solo through two more instrumentalists whose venue for expression is the spoken word.

Hickman first encounters Love New after he learns from Janey Glover that the man used to be a mentor to Severen during the boy’s youth in Oklahoma. When Hickman first meets Love New, he is confronted with an aging, dark-skinned Native American whose appearance inspires the following thought from Hickman: “he was instantly curious as to what idiom of speech and timbre of voice would emerge from a black man dressed in such a costume. Would it be Indian or Negro? Yes, and given the changes of time, perhaps even Harvard?...And hearing the trace of black Southern idiom in the high Indian timbre he smiled, thinking, Whatever this fellow calls himself he’s some kind of mixture” (TBS, 765). Ellison sets up Love New as a soloist with a distinct voice forged through a mixture of disparate influences. Love New proves to weave “Indian,” “Negro,” and “Harvard” influences into his style through a “black Southern idiom,” a “high Indian timbre,” and through the fact that Hickman observes his house to be filled with books.
Love New’s expansive monologue includes the story of the birth of Severen, his personal account of becoming a medicine man, and his own conception of the history of America. Through his diverse background, Love New has a perspective on Severen and on America that is wholly unique. Towards the end of his dialogue, Love New gives a reason for why he finds it necessary to be long-winded in his explanation of Severen’s situation. In his explanation, Love New comments on the differences between the perspective of the “State folks,” Americans from Europe and Africa, and the perspective of “the People,” members of his Native American tribe:

That you State folks tend to see color before you see individuals. That you reduce a man to his color and overlook his uniqueness, his culture. That you State folks tend to see in the way of the shotgun, which scatters its shot in loose patterns. Which is fine for bringing down birds, but not worth a damn for stopping a man or a grizzly.
For such the way of the rifle is needed, and even better, a telescoped rifle. One which can isolate details of camouflaged shapes, detect the slightest degree of uncontrolled tension, and allow a hunter to see through the shadows surrounding his target. Because when he’s dealing with those who enter the field of his vision such attention to detail is imperative. Aye! And when they speak with forked tongues it helps to have ears tuned to detect what’s being said and what’s not being said. Which is my way with all men of all shapes, forms, and colors. A way which makes a hell of a difference between me and you State folks--you with me?” (TBS, 805)

In his detailed oral history, Love New strives for “the way of the rifle,” because he believes that “attention to detail” is the only way not to reduce a man to his outward appearance. Love New claims that knowing a person’s “uniqueness” is vital in understanding his identity, so he includes his history of America in order to place Severen within the context of “his culture.” Through this exhaustive approach, Love New wishes to demystify the dire effect that Severen’s complex situation has had upon his identity.
Love New’s histories and explanations prove to be revelatory, but they are also full of obvious exaggerations and fabricated experiences. This aspect of Love New’s persona lives up to a warning that Janey Glover had given Hickman before the two men met in person. In describing him, Janey called Love New “one of the biggest liars that ever made a mess of the truth,” and that “he’s the kind who’ll insist that black is white and white is black and set out to prove it” (TBS, 761). Even after receiving this warning, Hickman still pays Love New his full attention because he brings with him a certain understanding for Love New’s lying that he explains in the following passage:

What a character! Knowing full well that the truth is seldom as simple as we’d like it to be he laces what he says with lies and dares you to find the truth in his lying…Well he has his ways and I have mine, and just as a musician’s background comes out in his music, whatever this little joker’s true identity happens to be sounds in the styles he combines in his lying. Like those echoes of Hiawatha keep accenting the beat of his riffing. (TBS, 804)

Hickman’s background as a jazz player once again proves helpful in providing a way to understand conceptions of the world that are different from his own. Hickman describes Love New as a musician whose “background” and “riffing” can be heard in the sounds of his “lying.” Through this description, Love New’s lying is not a simple divergence from the truth, but an actual framework by which Love New offers his understanding of the world. Hickman sees that there are “truths in his lying” that become apparent once the listener learns how to grasp the story as a whole rather than concentrate on the exaggerations laced throughout.

Love New’s identity as a storyteller is defined by his skill in the “art of lying.”

In his introduction to Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars’ Club, Chris Teuton
explores different Cherokee storytellers and reveals how the art of lying is a motif present in the Native American oral tradition:

Among Cherokees, telling “lies” refers to storytelling generally, but in particular to telling stories that stretch the imagination and belief... when people hear the stories of gagoga they often say, “That can’t be true.” Stories of the ancient time when animals could talk and when monsters roamed the earth may be believed by Cherokee listeners, but their veracity depends upon an element of faith in the teachings of the elders, which ultimately must be validated through personal experience. (Teuton, 7-8)

With descriptions of two-headed animals and men transforming into eagles, Love New’s account is full of “stories that stretch the imagination and belief.” Through his continued attention to Love New, Hickman proves that he has the capacity to retain an “element of faith” in Love New’s ability to express truths that can only be reached through stories that exaggerate the truth.

Towards the end of the performance, Love New presents Hickman with the opportunity to prove his understanding when he allows Hickman to add his own riffs to Love New’s description of Severen. The two play off of each other in a way similar to the solo shared by Bliss and Hickman in the Juneteenth sermon. However, this time around it is Hickman who plays the role of accompanist for Love New, the soloist.

“So when a child is snatched from a way of life to which he’s been adjusted and set down in one that’s quite different its like he’s being born again.

“That’s what happened to the boy. When he landed in the East he underwent a second childhood during his childhood. Because out here he lived in the brightness of Janey’s darkness, her blackness. But now he was living in the shadow that goes with his whiteness. And being forced to learn how to make his way with black-seeing eyes while undergoing the pressure of becoming a white child.

“This took much time, so for years the unnamed thing left him at peace—yes, but soon he became a buck of a man. And then some smell, or sound or sight, some taste of food, echo of memory, or

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14 See page 20 of this thesis.
shape of shadow roiled up the underground of his life with Janey and that which was sleeping awoke…”
“...So it awoke,” Hickman said, “but what then?”
“It awoke, that’s right, and like the cicada, the harvest fly, it surfaced…”
“...Which means that it crawled to the surface and left its old shell clinging to the branch of a tree like the shell of a locust…”
“Yao! It split the back of its shell straight down the middle and climbed out beside it. Then, stretching its wet limbs to dry in the sunlight, it began to buzzing and humming…”
“So in the East it took new life?”
“Yao!”
“And found its voice and began singing a bebopping song like a mockingbird?”
“Aye! And because the boy was now vulnerable to the ghosts of the past he heard it…”
“...He heard it!”
“Yes, and heard it loud, but by no means did he hear it clearly. So with that his white life took some of the color-feeling that’s described in a song I’ve heard you State negroes sing…”
“Now wait, man,” Hickman said, “what song would that be?”
“Just listen, Hickman,” Love said,” and since you’re turning this into some kind of medicine man’s prayer meeting, why don’t you go on with your medicine and use your mind? What else would it be but the one about the blues jumping on the back of some rabbit-assed rascal and riding him ten thousand miles?”
Slapping his thigh, Hickman laughed.
“...So listen to me: This thing out of the boys past has jumped him exactly the way the blues jumped the rabbit. And once in the boy’s white skin of a saddle it dug in its spurs and took off hell for leather.”
“...Riding like a cowboy…”
“Yao!” (TBS, 845-846)

Once Hickman understands Love New’s conception of Severen’s condition, he begins to support and even add to Love New’s metaphors. The two voices become one in expressing the idea that “like the cicada, the harvest fly, it surfaced…Which means that it crawled to the surface and left its old shell clinging to the branch of a tree like the shell of a locust…” Hickman and Love New use different tools for expression, but they share in their knowledge of the way of the “medicine man.” Just as Hickman’s “traditional techniques” as described in the Juneteenth sermon are
“Amen!” and “Yes!,” Love New uses idiomatic expressions of his own such as “Yao!” and “Aye!”. In much the same way that two jazz musicians who have a common musical background can share a stage without previous rehearsal, Hickman and Love New are able to riff off of each other due to their common knowledge of the idiom of the medicine man.

The above passage ends when Love New tests Hickman’s knowledge of the standard repertoire by referring to “the one about the blues jumping on the back of some rabbit-assed rascal and riding him ten thousand miles.” Hickman understands the riff and the two are able to keep playing off of one another. The reference remains unexplained in the dialogue, so it reveals Ellison once again calling for the reader to independently seek out the “original melody.” The tune to which Love New refers is a blues standard by the name of “Rabbit Foot Blues,” originally recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson. The lyrics that Ellison references serve as the first verse to the song.

Blues jumped the rabbit, runnin’ one solid mile
Blues jumped the rabbit, runnin’ one solid mile.
This rabbit set out, cryin’ like a newborn child.

In the liner notes to his album release, Blind Lemon Jefferson is described as “the first guitar bluesman of any stature” who “opened a new area of record sales when he started recording for Paramount records in 1926.” Before Blind Lemon Jefferson’s recordings, female singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey had dominated the

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15 See page 22 of this thesis.
vocal blues-recording scene, but Jefferson’s records were popular and spurred the demand for more blues singers like him to be recorded.\(^{17}\)

Several artists have used the metaphor of the blues jumping the rabbit after Blind Lemon Jefferson. In her song entitled “Blues Jumped the Rabbit,” Karen Dalton uses the image to get across a very different meaning than that present in “Rabbit Foot Blues.” Blind Lemon’s song is a lighthearted number with lyrics like “I have Uneeda biscuits gal, and a half pint of gin” (Jefferson). Dalton’s song takes a very different approach as a melancholy folk ballad with a slow tempo and images such as “Wish I was in cool Colorado, on some mountain so high.”\(^{18}\) A third manifestation of the lyrics can be seen in blues legend Taj Mahal’s number, “Good Mornin’ Miss Brown,” which uses the metaphor of the blues jumping the rabbit alongside lyrics such as “You know I got the misery and a back ache baby/ And my feets hurtin’ me when I walk.”\(^{19}\) All three artists bring out very different meanings from the common image of a “blues jumping a rabbit.” In following this pattern, Ellison uses the metaphor in order to convey his own meaning in describing Severen’s state of mind.

In this light, Ellison joins in the songwriting tradition alongside Blind Lemon Jefferson, Karen Dalton, and Taj Mahal.

The rabbit ridden by the blues is a helpful image in evoking Severen’s dilemma for several reasons. Severen is described as a “white child” with “black-seeing eyes,” into whose “white skin” the blues “dug in its spurs.” In other words, Severen is the rabbit with a white appearance who is taken over by his blues sensibility or “black-seeing eyes.” These blues then rode him “one solid mile,” back

to Oklahoma in search of his true identity. Through his knowledge of the blues and jazz tradition, Hickman is able to pick up on Love New’s reference and fully understand the significance of the description.

To end their encounter, Hickman and Love New reveal their gained understanding of one another through the following conversation:

“Now that you’ve become my brother in medicine, when you know more about what the boy’s up to, come back and I’ll do the listening.”

“I’ll be glad to share whatever I learn,” Hickman said. “And this I can tell you right now: One thing that I learned as a musician was how to listen. So when it comes to you I’ll listen, and carefully, to anything that you have to say.” (TBS, 851)

Love New confirms that their shared experience has led them to become “brothers in medicine.” This bond is made possible through Hickman’s ability to listen to Love New “as a musician” who weaves together different influences from his past in the forging of his unique voice. Through Love New, Ellison combines the “high Indian timbre” and “black southern idiom,” as represented respectively by Love New’s artful lying and reference to a blues standard, in order to create a uniquely American storyteller and soloist.
Part 2: Cliofus

Hickman’s continued search for Severen leads him to seek out a young man named Cliofus, who grew up alongside Severen as a fellow foster child of Janey Glover. Janey informs Hickman that Cliofus works as a performer at a nightclub called the “Cave of Winds” where, as Janey puts it, “he has a job of saying filthy toasts for those drunkards and telling them stories!” (TBS, 853). Hickman decides to go to the club to see Cliofus perform in order to gain information about the possible whereabouts of Severen. Upon entering the nightclub, Hickman describes the club as follows: “Warm and friendly, the room’s atmosphere was alive with that tension of hopeful expectation which he knew to arouse the best efforts of jazz musicians. Yes, and the best revival meetings. For both shared some of the same hopeful anticipation of joyful fulfillment” (TBS, 862). Along with once again stressing the connection between jazz and religious performances, Hickman’s description sets up the Cave of Winds as a location where “public rites” are performed, similar to sites of the religious revival and the jazz hall discussed earlier in connection with Hickman’s performance style. The description also places Cliofus, the upcoming performer, as a “jazz musician” whose “best efforts” will be brought out by an excited and engaged audience.

Before Cliofus enters the stage, a man named “Buster,” who owns the nightclub and also grew up in Janey’s home with Cliofus and Severen, provides an introduction for Cliofus. Through the use of the name “Buster,” Ellison presents a riff, which takes its origin from one of Ellison’s previous works of fiction. In the short story collection *Flying Home and Other Stories*, Ellison uses two boys named “Riley” and

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20 See page 24 of this thesis.
“Buster” as the protagonists of several stories. One story in the collection, entitled “A Coupla Scalped Indians,” includes a character named Buster but is distinct from the other Buster stories in that it is told in the first person. The narrator, who is left unnamed, tells the story of when he and Buster traveled through the woods to complete Boy Scout tests, as well as to make their way to an event where they knew jazz would be playing. The two boys get sidetracked, and the narrator has a troubling but transforming interaction with a mysterious woman named “Aunt Mackie.”

The narrator of the story shares many characteristics with the boy Severen from *Three Days Before the Shooting*…, and these similarities are so evident that they could not have been created incidentally by Ellison. In the following passage, the narrator reveals these similarities through a description of his family: “I had no family, only Miss Janey, who took me after my mother died (I didn’t know my father)” (*FH*, 69). Both boys lost their mother at a young age, did not know their father, were brought up by a woman named Janey, and grew up alongside a boy named Buster. These similarities, along with the fact that the narrator in the story is left unnamed, both allow for parallels to be drawn between this boy and Severen, and further, suggests that they are in fact the same person. In *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, Adam Bradley comments on the way in which Severen is left somewhat ambiguous as a character in *Three Days Before the Shooting*…

For all his importance, however, Severen gradually loses his corporeal presence in the novel becoming…a disembodied voice, a shadow, a name and abstract motive, and finally almost nothing at all. At times Hickman wonders whether he has seen him in a crowd, but by the time Hickman looks back to confirm it, Severen is gone. (Bradley, 143)

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21 Ellison: *Flying Home and Other Stories* [*FH*]
Bradley is accurate in his assessment of Severen as a character who becomes an “abstract motive” in the narrative of the second novel in that he simply serves to lead Hickman in his wanderings through Oklahoma and Washington D.C. The similarities that Ellison maintains between the second novel and “A Coupla Scalped Indians,” however, act as signifying riffs that lead the reader to consider the narrator of this short story as the voice of Severen. This riff serves to provide the reader with a brief look into the mind of a character that is otherwise left relatively unknown in the narrative.

The connection between these two characters becomes stronger through the following description that the narrator from “A Coupla Scalped Indians” offers to portray the mysterious character, “Aunt Mackie.”

Ho Aunt Mackie, talker-with-spirits, prophetess-of-disaster, odd-dweller-alone in a riverside shack surrounded by sunflowers, morning-glories, and strange magical weeds (Yao as Buster during our Indian phase would have put it, Yao!)… Aunt Mackie, nobodies sister but still Aunt Mackie to us all (Ho, Yao!); teller of fortunes, concocter of powerful, body rending spells (Yah Yao!); Aunt Mackie, the remote one though always seen about us; night consulted advisor to farmers on crops and cattle (Yao!) (FH, 68)

The narrator uses “Yao!” as an expressive tool in much the same way that Love New used the term in his oral performance discussed earlier. The narrator says that he learned the term from Buster who made use of it during the two boys’ “Indian phase.” If Buster and the narrator are assumed to be Buster and Severen, these clues lead the reader to imagine Buster to have been inspired by the voice of Love New who, in the second novel, acts as a mentor to the two boys during their childhood. In the middle of “A Coupla Scalped Indians,” Buster and the narrator can hear the playing

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22 See page 42 of this thesis.
of a jazz band in the distance. The two boys have the following conversation about the instruments they hear.

“Now that there tuba’s saying:

‘They don’t play ‘em, I know they don’t.
They don’t play ‘em, I know they won’t.
They just don’t play no nasty dirty twelves...’”

“Man you are a scalp-headed fool. How about that trumpet?”
“Him, that fool’s a soldier, he’s really signifying. Saying,

‘So y’all don’t play ‘em, hey?
So y’all won’t play ‘em, hey?
Well pat your feet and clap your hands,
Cause I’m going ‘em to the promised land...’

“Man, the white folks know what that fool is signifying on that horn they’d run him clear out the world. Trumpet’s got a real nasty mouth.” (FH, 70-71)

This passage in “A Coupla Scalped Indians” represents one of the first instances in which Ellison represents a jazz solo through words, which is a technique common throughout Hickman’s speeches and internal dialogues as seen in the Stackalee verse discussed above. These shared riffs that run throughout both the second novel and this short story show Ellison establishing a conversation between two of his fictional landscapes. This technique provides a glimpse into the psyche of Severen, and allows Ellison to signify on a work of his own that falls into the “jazz/blues literature” canon.

While at the Cave of Winds, Hickman is brought into contact with a Buster who has grown from the boy in “A Coupla Scalped Indians” to have a voice distinctly his own. Buster is given the chance to be heard through the introduction he provides for Cliofus. His preface to Cliofus’ show further sets up the type of performance that Cliofus goes on to present.

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23 See page 15 of this thesis.
“He’s waiting to entertain you, and you know the rules: Give him a theme and he’ll take it from there. He’ll tell you stories, he’ll give you toasts as juicy as our good beef roasts. He’ll give you speeches, poems, and orations—hell, if you want it, he’ll even give you the United Nations, discord included. He’ll give you Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, he’ll give you Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, he’ll give you Franklin Roosevelt, the Happy Warrior or the Sermon on the Mountain—but you know, and I know that that’s not why you came here to the Cave of Winds! So now the joint is yours to call the tune.

(TBS, 864)

Through Buster’s introduction, Ellison presents Cliofus as a jazz performer who takes requests from an audience that is allowed the opportunity to “give him a theme” or “call the tune.” The introduction also foreshadows Cliofus’ ability as a storyteller to weave together different oral traditions like “speeches,” “poems,” and “toasts.” The “toast” is a form of storytelling that is described in Roger D. Abrahams’ folklore collection, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, as follows:

The toast is a narrative poem which is recited, often in a theatrical manner, and represents the greatest flowering of Negro verbal talent. Quite often they are long, lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes. They conform to a general, but by no means binding framing pattern. (Abrahams, 99)

Cliofus’ oral performance generally follows Abraham’s definition of the toast in that it is a “theatrical” and “recited” narration that is very long lasting. After Buster’s introduction, members of the audience begin to call for different stories that they hope to hear Cliofus riff upon. These shouts lead a man in the audience to give the following off-handed comment, “And it serves you right...because after that you’ll be wanting to hear some juvenile crap like the *Signifying Monkey!* Every time a man comes in here to enjoy himself some of you clowns are asking Cliofus for that or for *Shine!* Hell, you need to go somewhere and get educated!” (TBS, 864). The man’s comment references two of the most well known characters from toasts in the African American oral tradition, who are commonly referenced to as “The Signifying
Monkey” and “Shine.” The fact that the man denounces the audience’s desire to hear these oft-recited stories shows that Cliofus is a performer of the toast who raises the art form to a level of complexity that goes beyond the conventions as represented by these stories. Cliofus’ style is made clearer through Buster’s introduction, revealing that Cliofus has the ability to weave in discourses as complex as “the United Nations” and “Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois” into the form of the toast.

In her article, “The African American Toast Tradition,” Mona Lisa Saloy summarizes the general storyline of the well-known toast, “Shine and the Titanic”:

As is common in toasts, a narrator describes Shine's successful exploits, while Shine directly addresses the captain, his daughter, and the whale. Shine, the black stoker and hero of the toast, repeatedly warns the white captain of the impending disaster and humbly gives updates on the sinking ship. Even though Shine is ignored, hustled, and chased by a whale, he remains confident of his ability and determination. It is Shine alone who can save the day. (Saloy)

Cliofus draws on many motifs found in the toasts of “The Signifying Monkey” and “Shine,” including that of the “the whale” from “Shine and the Titanic.” Cliofus uses the whale in a very different context in his story recounting the adventures of an elementary school class as they take a field trip to see the petrified body of a sperm whale on display. Cliofus’ story about the whale reveals his ability to draw upon a wide variety of influences in his use of the form of the toast. The whale described in Cliofus’ story not only brings to mind the whale in Shine’s story, but also Melville’s infamous whale, Moby Dick. The elementary school class in Cliofus’ story runs into a strange man who gives the class a “lecture” “about the history and habits of the great sperm whale.” This man has a “short wooden leg,” smokes a “corn cob pipe turned upside down,” is a self-proclaimed “bold harpooner,” and carries with him what “he
swears to be ambergris.” All of these characteristics present the man as a comical caricature of Ahab from *Moby-Dick*.

During the lecture given by this “pseudo-Ahab,” a boy in the class, Tyree, expresses his opinion on the man’s “ambergris” by saying, “‘Hey y’all’… ‘y’all can believe what you want to, but far’s I’m concered that there stuff ain’t nothing but whale puke! And I don’t care what that white man says about it!” (*TBS*, 882). Chapter 92 of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, entitled “Ambergris,” describes the process by which an item present in sick whales, called ambergris, is extracted from their bodies and used in the production of perfumes.24 Through Clifous, Ellison pokes fun at Melville’s novel by commenting that it is largely a “lecture” on “the great sperm whale,” and that it glorifies items like ambergris, which most people would think of as “whale puke.” This riff from *Moby-Dick* not only allows Ellison to once again pay homage to a foundational artist of “jazz/blues literature,”25 but also to show that even Melville’s great novel is not above comical critique.

Along with his riffs upon literature, Clifous constantly makes references to popular culture. These references range from naming a character after the famous African American boxer “Beau Jack” to using as a setting the Santa Fe train, *Super Chief*, that was known as “the train of the stars” because it famously transported celebrities from Chicago to Los Angeles (Grace). In the following passage, Clifous describes the nature of his virtuosic ability with words:

> “Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve heard it said that people misuse words, and I agree. But due to my condition, I’m forced to look a little deeper and recognize the fact that very often it’s *words* that misuse *people*. Because frequently when you think you are saying something which you intend to say, what comes out is what the

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24 *Moby-Dick*, 363-364.

25 See page 12 of this thesis.
words stored inside your head force you to say. And a good example of that is what happened to a piano player who claims that when he is in his liquor he doesn’t worry about how his music sounds because he leaves it up to his educated fingers, and that when his fingers take off he just sits back and goes along to wherever they take him.” (TBS, 866)

Cliofus equates his technique to that used by jazz players who attempt to reach a level of virtuosity through their practice, which allows them to separate themselves from their playing in order to observe their music from an outsider’s point of view. This conception of Cliofus sets him up as a virtuoso performer of the word who allows his “educated” words to take over in the same way that the musician allows his “educated fingers” to take over. This practice is evident in Cliofus' ability to seamlessly weave into his routine references to popular culture, literature, the folk tradition, and jazz. In the same way that a jazz musician puts in the time to practice riffs from many different sources in order to bring them out during performances, Cliofus has developed a deep knowledge of cultural references, so that these references can effortlessly surface when Cliofus allows his words to take control.

Love New and Cliofus represent instruments through which Ellison raises two different oral traditions, Native American lying and African American toasts, to the level of a virtuosic performance. In both cases, this ability on the part of the performers is earned similarly to the way in which a jazz performer reaches new heights of virtuosity: through persistent practice and familiarity with the many riffs that can be heard and seen around them.
**Conclusion**

The essay “Living With Music” ends when Ellison comments on the music teachers of his youth in Oklahoma City and their tendency to discount jazz and the blues by claiming the superiority of classical music. Ellison goes on to note that he and his fellow students got their share of jazz at the dance halls and were thus happily exposed to both classical music and jazz. As a result, Ellison makes the following claim:

> Nevertheless, we learned some of it all, for in the United States when traditions are juxtaposed they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, irresistibly to merge. Thus, musically at least, each child in our town was an heir of all the ages. One learns by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and while it might sound incongruous at first, the step from the spirituality of the spirituals to the Beethoven of the symphonies or the Bach of the chorales is not as vast as it seems. Nor is the romanticism of a Brahms or Chopin completely unrelated to that of Louis Armstrong. Those who know their native culture and love it unchauvanistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.

Living with music today we find Mozart and Ellington, Kirsten Flagstad and Chippie Hill, William L. Dawson and Carl Orff all forming part of our regular fair. For all exalt life in rhythm and melody; all add to its significance. Perhaps in the swift change in American society in which the meanings of one’s origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time.²⁶

Ellison presents the idea that music has the ability to transcend cultural boundaries in a way not possible through other cultural forms of expression. In describing this concept, Ellison brings together disparate musical figures such as “Mozart and Ellington” through their shared task of exalting “life in rhythm and melody.”

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²⁶ Ellison: “Living With Music.” *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings.*
The above quote makes clear that Ellison believed that an “unchauvanistic” love of one’s cultural heritage is the key to properly “encountering the unfamiliar.” This love recognizes the importance of diving into one’s own culture while at the same time recognizing that forms of expression from other cultures are equally viable and legitimate. In this light, an unbiased love of one’s culture allows figures like Mozart and Ellington to be of equal importance in the musical tradition. Consequently, the artistic canon has no room for the sort of hierarchy that might be imposed by people such as the teachers of Ellison’s youth. When applied to Three Days Before the Shooting…, this equality proves to be the key to understanding why Ellison’s prose draws upon disparate sources such as Melville, Ellington, Blind Lemon Johnson, Reverend C.L. Franklin, and Native American storytelling.

Ellison first began to conceive of art in a unique way when he attended Tuskegee and took note of the similarities between T.S. Eliot and Louis Armstrong. The connections that Ellison saw between these two artists led him to realize that art forms which had previously been viewed as strictly separate were in fact similar and inherently connected. In order to express this notion through his own art, Ellison developed a literary style that could bring disparate influences together. Ellison found this style through the jazz riffs of his fiction. When different references are conceived of as riffs, their sources are equalized, because they come to be understood as single melodic ideas that are woven together in the making of a jazz solo. In Robert G. O’Meally’s introduction to Living With Music, he describes how Ellison once noted Louis Armstrong’s ability to use “nonchalant quotations of Verdi, Broadway Ballads, and ‘The Hoochie Coochie Song’ within the frame of a single
improvised solo.” Ellison understood Louis Armstrong as an artist who could subtly bring together melodies from influences as divergent as Verdi and “The Hoochie Coochie Song.” Ellison uses this melodic strategy in his own art through the many different riffs that he weaves together in his prose.

Ellison started to develop his riffing style long before he began to work on *Three Days Before the Shooting*…, and a maturation process similar to that of a jazz musician can be seen in the trajectory of his fiction and essays. The opening of the “Prologue” of *Invisible Man* shows Ellison in an early stage of his career as a man of riffs when he immediately references Edgar Allen Poe. Ellison then goes on to mention Dante just before he dives into a sermon that presents a call and response between a preacher and his congregation (*IM*, 9). This imagined sermon ends with the Louis Armstrong riff, “What did I do / To be so black / And blue?” (*IM*, 12). In the same way that Louis Armstrong was able to quote Verdi and “The Hoochie Coochie Song” within a single solo, Ellison is able to riff upon Poe, Dante and the sermonic tradition within a single chapter. In the first twelve pages of *Invisible Man*, Ellison displays the beginnings of his jazz influenced, Louis Armstrong-esque riffing style that he would go on to further develop in *Three Days Before the Shooting*…

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison plays his riffs through the voice of a narrator whose background is intentionally elusive and mysterious. This character type allows Ellison to riff upon many influences through one voice because the narrator is not limited to a certain body of cultural knowledge. Alternatively, *Three Days Before the Shooting*… presents an ensemble cast of characters that are much more concrete in their background and cultural influences, which allows Ellison to draw upon each

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27 O’Meally: “Jazz Shapes”, xiii
character’s specific heritage. For example, Reverend Hickman uses jazz and the gospel, Love New draws on Native American storytelling, and Clifous plays upon the African American toast tradition. These shifts in the style of narration reveal the evolution of Ellison’s jazz prose in which he moves away from a single voice that can play diverse riffs, as is present in *Invisible Man*, towards a diverse set of voices that draw upon specific cultural heritages that stem from lived experiences. These cultural heritages enable and limit the riffs that each of Ellison’s characters can play. Within this framework, the characters of *Three Days Before the Shooting*... can be understood as different instruments that come together to make up a jazz ensemble. These characters, much like the instruments that make up a big band, are defined by certain abilities and certain limitations that inform compositional decisions. For example, a trombone can slide from note to note but is limited in its ability to play fast passages that, for example, a saxophone could cleanly play. This dynamic is similar to the relationship between the characters in *Three Days Before the Shooting*... in which Reverend Hickman has the ability to draw upon jazz and the gospel but is unable to use Native American lying in the way that Love New can. Like a big band composer, Ellison takes into account these abilities and limitations when he composes the passages that each of his characters play. Through this development in compositional style, Ellison makes a clear step forward from *Invisible Man* in which all riffs are played through the same voice of the enigmatic narrator. This progression is similar to that of jazz composers who write for small jazz combos early in their career and then move on to compose for big band ensembles once they fully develop their compositional abilities.

Ellison’s literary canon, running from his first short stories to the last work he did on his second novel, presents the discography of a jazz artist whose perfected
instrument of expression is written prose. Through his fiction and his essays, Ellison displays his virtuosic ability to riff upon varied sources, which he draws on in an attempt to show how these influences are connected in ways never before imagined. Written over the last forty years of his life, *Three Days Before the Shooting*… represents a vital component in Ellison’s discography in which he developed and refined his riffing style within the framework of a big band ensemble of diverse characters. In order to fully appreciate Ellison as an artist, the savvy Ellison listener must move beyond a conception of the second novel as a failure and move towards an appreciation of the rich material contained within the riffs of *Three Days Before the Shooting*…. 
Helpful Images:

William Lee in *The Washington Family*, by Edward Savage

William Lee in *George Washington Holding the Declaration of Independence and The Treaty of Alliance with France*

By Noel Le Mire

From Ted Lewis Album *Me and My Shadow*
Bibliography


Lewis, Ted. [Cover Art] In *Me and My Shadow.* Ted Lewis. Unique Jazz, n.d. CD.


